

The Amiable Pretenders

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privacy might make the intruders move on. The Nice Man had come into the room and was standing beside the chair in which Priscilla had been sitting when he left her, his expression still one of surprise, tinged deeply with annoyance and regret.

Priscilla moved so that he could see her, though her face was hidden from the woman on the divan.

"I'm here," she said, in a nervous little voice. "It was so warm. There is a little more air here by the window."

The man's face cleared miraculously, and he joined her.

"I was in a beastly funk, you know—afraid you had gone. You're not feeling faint, are you? I'll open the window."

He suited the action to the words; and as she looked out into the garden Priscilla's longing for flight swelled to monumental proportions.

"I wonder whether one could get out that way," she said.

"Out where?"

"To the street."

"I suppose so; but who wants to get out to the street?"

Truth rushed to her lips.

"I do," she said with fervor.

He stared blankly at her.

"But, if you want to go away—"

he began, somewhat stiffly.

An overwhelming desire to cry came upon her. If anything could make the situation worse, tears would do it; but she felt them coming. The lump in her throat was swelling, swelling, her self-control crumpling up little by little.

"If you want to go—"

repeated the offended young man at her side.

"Oh, I do, I do!" she urged. The quiver in her voice caught his ear; and, as he looked down at her, he saw something glistening on her eyelashes. His bewilderment deepened. She was not snubbing him. She was appealing to him. He did not understand, but his manhood rose to meet the appeal.

"There's some one I want to avoid," she explained. "Some one it would be dreadfully embarrassing for me to meet; and if I could go out quietly, through the garden—Do you think it is possible? Do you, truly?"

Her voice was tremulously eager. The man stepped out through the long French window and looked about him.

"The area entrance is around the other side; but we couldn't go out there, anyway. That would look jolly queer. There must be a garden door somewhere in the wall. I've an idea it's around the corner of the shrubbery down there. Shall we try for it?"

"If anyone should see us?"

"We are passionately fond of gardens. There's probably a door somewhere through which one could walk into this particular garden without exciting comment. Even if the balcony scene has an audience, it will probably be credited to whim—or sentiment; and I don't imagine anyone will see us."

He was using the first person plural freely and Priscilla found it comforting. She was no longer alone in her her adventure. Gathering her trailing skirts around her, she stepped out through the window.

"There are some steps here; but they are rickety. Be careful." The man turned to lend the girl a hand.

For a moment their eyes were on a level, his face was very close to hers, and something in the eyes, in the whole face, made her step carelessly, stumble, fall. He caught her, held her in his arms only a second longer than necessity demanded, and set her on her feet on the brick walk, with a scrupulously formal, "You're not hurt, I hope?"

"Oh, no, thank you. It was no fall at all." The girl replied with a conventional civility even more pronounced than the man's; but in her fast-thumping heart she felt she had fallen far, fallen fathoms deep into something—a something to which she refused to give a name. For the time being they had forgotten they were trespassers; but,

rounding the shrubbery corner, they came upon a gardener busy with rose cuttings. Priscilla stopped short with a little exclamation of dismay; but the Nice Man demonstrated the superiority of his sex by a cheerful serenity. He even stood watching the gardener nonchalantly for a few moments before he said, in a matter-of-course tone:

"My man, there's a street door somewhere along here, isn't there? We'll go out that way to our cab and avoid the crowd."

"Yes, sir. Just beyond the pear trees. I'll unlock it for you, sir."

He led the way, unlocked the door, and stood respectfully aside. A coin changed hands.

"Thank you, sir. You'll be coming back. I'll leave the door unlocked, sir."

Priscilla drew a long, exultant breath. She had escaped. The worst was over—but was it? She looked dubiously at the Nice Man and her exultation ebbed. They would have to say good-bye now. He was signaling for a hansom; but there was a puzzled expression on his face.

"Now, why was he so sure I'd be coming back that way?" he said reflectively. Priscilla's glance traveled up past the handsome honest face with its boyish eyes, to the mop of blond hair which the wind had ruffled untidily.

"Your hat," she suggested.

"Oh, I say!"

A cloud of distress swept over his face, accenting the boyishness.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Don't you want to go back?"

"Well, hardly—hardly. Stupid ass to forget that hat!"

"Who not go and get it?"

"It won't look well, you know—if someone should see me—climbing in a side window."

"But even if someone should see you and stop you, you'd only have to tell who you are and send word to one of the family."

"That's just it," the man began—and stopped. "That's the last thing I could do."

Once more he checked himself and stood looking down miserably into the questioning eyes. At last he squared his shoulders resolutely.

"There's no use in dodging it. I may as well explain that I don't want to be dragged into the limelight. It wouldn't do me any good to send my name to the family. They wouldn't know it. They've never heard of me. I don't belong in there. I wasn't invited."

"What!"

Priscilla's exclamation was a subdued shriek, pregnant with feeling. The man read the feeling as horror.

"Yes, I know," he said wretchedly. "I ought to have told you. It's rather a dirty business, breaking into a man's home, but we can't always choose, and I never thought very much about it before. It was all off color to speak to you—caddish trick; but you looked so—you were so—you know one does things without stopping to think, sometimes."

"One does," admitted Priscilla with conviction. Her brain was in a whirl. What was the man? He talked like a burglar, and yet surely no burglar ever had eyes like the honest, unhappy pair looking into hers.

"And I hated to have it all come to an end."

There was no antecedent for the "it," but Priscilla seemed to understand.

"Why did you go?" she asked.

"It wasn't your cabman?"

He looked surprised.

"Cabman! Oh, no. I walked. The Old Man sent me, you see."

"The Old Man?"

"Yes, our editor. He got word that Z— was coming over from Paris for the wedding and going back on the two o'clock train—incog., and all that sort of thing, you know. So he sent me up to see if I could squeeze a word out of the old chap on his latest

Eastern entanglement. The Duke's down on newspaper men—froths at the mouth if he meets one; so there was no use asking for the interview. Had to break in as one of the guests and watch for my chance. Beastly business. Don't know why any decent fellow does it; but some way or other the thing seems different when it's for your paper. I managed to duck the receiving line and was looking around for Z— when I saw you, and—Oh, well, I fell down on the story, but I knew there was another man waiting at the train, and he'd get the interview some way or other. I meant to look up my man; but it didn't seem worth while. Nothing seemed worth while except—There weren't any strawberry ices, all apricot," he ended, lamely.

"You're a newspaper man?" Priscilla asked, breathlessly.

"Yes."

"Not a lord or an earl or anything?"

He gloomily disowned the whole British Peerage.

The girl laughed—a hysterical little laugh, full of smiles and tears, and relief and nerves—a laugh so complex that the man altogether failed to analyze it.

"Oh, it's too absurd! It's too perfectly absurd," she said, as she turned and climbed into the waiting hansom. The man stood, staring after her, his eyes stormy, his jaw set in an ugly fashion.

She leaned forward, entreating in her eyes.

"You'll have to get in. I can't tell you, with the cabman watching us."

"Into the cab?" He was amazed, incredulous.

"Oh, yes; do, please. I'm like the Ancient Mariner. I simply have to tell my story—but if I don't do it very soon, I won't have the courage to do it at all. Do get in."

He sprang into the cab. An interested eye peered through the aperture in the top and a beery voice asked, "Where to?"

The man looked at Priscilla.

"Anywhere," she murmured recklessly. Here was kidnapping added to her earlier crimes. It had seemed easy to explain to the Nice Man, when she first heard that he, too, was a rank outsider; but now a realization that men have one set of proprieties for themselves and another for their women folk had come to her and once more she was afraid, desperately afraid, that the eternal masculine would be scandalized, uncharitable, when her story was told.

"Round Hyde Park," the man said to the driver; and, as he turned to the girl beside him, she took her courage in both hands and plunged into her confession.

"I was so ashamed. I couldn't tell you. It was mostly the cabman's fault. I'd never have thought of it, if he hadn't taken it for granted."

No prelude; no context. The man was altogether befogged.

"B—but—" he stammered. She snatched the words from his lips.

"But it was horrid. Of course it was. I don't see how I could do it. The moment I was in I would have given the world to be out. But I couldn't tell you. I knew you would be shocked and I— you— well, I didn't want you to know. I kept feeling worse and worse." She turned to face her companion. It was out now. He knew the worst about her. She would be able to read his opinion of her in his face.

The face expressed nothing save hopeless bewilderment.

"The wedding," she explained, impatiently.

"Oh, the wedding!" His brain was laboring. "You weren't invited to it?"

She shook her head.

"I just happened to be in the church."

"And you don't know the Duchess or Lady Mary or any of that crowd?"

Another dismal shake of the head. A singularly cheerful alertness had succeeded the man's state of stupefaction. He was leaning forward now to look into her face; but she did not dare to meet his eyes.

"Perhaps you aren't an American

heires?" he hazarded with a certain subdued hopefulness.

She was done with masquerading and concealment.

"I'm nobody. I'm nothing. I'm traveling with a Cook's party and we are staying at a cheap boarding house, number nine, Bedford Square. Will you please tell the driver to take me there?"

She hurled out the damning details with reckless defiance; and, as defiantly, lifted her head and looked at him—only to drop the long lashes swiftly over her eyes again, after one glimpse of the face so near her own.

"It really was the cabman's fault," she quavered in a queer, uncertain little voice.

"God bless him! I wish I knew the name of that cabman. I'd like to mention it in my prayers," said the Nice Man, as his hand closed, gently, over hers.

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Mrs. J. I. Mertz left Tuesday for Joplin to join Mr. Mertz and make a tour of the West. Mr. Mertz has been imported to break the strike at Skiatook, where the trouble started. Only a few of these men were trying to

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A petition was filed asking that the order of the court incorporating the city of Bonne Terre be set aside and declared void. The matter was heard on Monday, July

of the two week bly, which conver Suburbanites in dens find that